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Keith C. Burris: Truth, fairness and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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By Keith C. Burris / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In recent days the readers of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette have been subjected to a great deal of disinformation about the Post-Gazette.

It is time for the rest of the story.

Let's start with this: Editors at this newspaper did not single out a black reporter and a black photographer and ban them from covering Pittsburgh protests after the killing of George Floyd.

And we certainly did not single out two people and keep them from covering local protests because they were black. That is an outrageous lie — a defamation, in fact.

We assumed the lie was so outrageous that it did not need refutation. We assumed most people could read the paper and see for themselves that the charge is an outrageous fabrication. We still think that, ultimately, this is true and that readers can think for themselves.

But we underestimated the power of social media and the corrosive potency of the racist label. It need only be said and it is assumed by some people to be true.

Here's the truth: No one was taken off the protest story because of race. One person was not assigned a story because of the suggestion of bias. A tweet was issued and a dialogue followed that editors felt was strong commentary — opinion — on a story the reporter was only supposed to report. This person was not taken off a story, but was never on it. And this person does not cover race or protests. There is no such beat. This person covers social media, normally.

When other journalists repeated the tweet, hence also opining, they also were disqualified from reporting on the protests — almost all of them (over 80) were white.

We did what we did for purely journalistic reasons. And here's the thing: Every single person involved in this matter and every single person leading the propaganda campaign against this newspaper, most of

whom work for this newspaper, knows this — absolutely knows this — full well.

What our editors did do was remind colleagues of a longstanding canon of journalism ethics: When you announce an opinion about a person or story you are reporting on you compromise your reporting. And your editor may take you off the story. This is a long-held tradition at this newspaper and at every good newspaper.

You can disagree with that ethic, or dismiss it as passe. But you cannot, fairly, call it racism.

It was called racism as a tactic in a labor dispute, and that is repugnant.

Post-Gazette guild leaders have the right, indeed the duty, to seek the best for their members. But characterizing an editorial decision as racially motivated helps no person and no cause.

Did we fail to fully appreciate what the new civil rights movement means to a young black woman?

Did we miss the larger context of all that is happening in our country right now?

As we attempted a teaching moment with a young reporter did we miss what could have been our own teaching moment?

A reasonable person could make any one of those cases.

But no fair person could make the case that our actions were race-based.

And we will not apologize for upholding professional standards in journalism or attempting to eliminate bias.

Why is this important? Because fairness, removal of bias, removal of even the hint of conflict of interest is our gold standard — all we really have as journalists.

We must also acknowledge the larger and deeper truth of institutional racism. Yes, the vast number of reporters who “stood with Alexis,” are white. We need to acknowledge that reality and alter it over time.

We believe we too stand with Alexis Johnson. We value her and her life experiences as we value all colleagues. We have and will continue to give her important assignments. But we must do so within the context of solid journalistic values.

If we abandon those values, we are lost. If we are driven by the half-truths and mobs of social media, we are no longer journalists.

Two things are the bedrock of journalism — truth and fairness.

When we sacrifice those two things because we think our ends are just and those ends justify the means, we destroy our profession; at a time when journalism is under siege, we destroy ourselves.

The Block family has a long and distinguished history on civil rights. And no newspaper in America, whether considered over the past 100 years or 100 days or 100 hours, has devoted more time, words or space to questions of discrimination, race prejudice, or justice than the Post-Gazette. That's because justice and fair play are indivisible. Balanced reporting and decent treatment of fellow human beings go hand in hand. You can never get to social justice without basic fairness.

A cursory examination of our news pages and our editorial pages on any given day or week shows who we are. And no one who knows our editors or any of their work or lives could believe any of them bigots. To the contrary — and then some.

Is this a time when people with power need to listen and be humble? Yes. Yes indeed. Can that listening be compatible with good journalism? Absolutely.

The journalism that made the most difference to the civil rights movement in the 1960s came not from the advocates, but the chroniclers — the reporters who let their subjects tell their stories and let the story exert its own grace.

A journalist can be a commentator or a chronicler. He or she cannot be both at the same time. But whether he is a straight up reporter or an opinion writer he must, above all, seek to be fair and truthful. When journalists forget that every story has a larger and a deeper scope, the result is simplistic and useless. When they sacrifice truth and fairness, the result is a tragic fraud.

The owners and managers of this newspaper value every member of our team and our community. We will also continue to insist upon the highest ethical and professional standards for every member of our family. And we will continue to listen and be chroniclers of the larger moments and the deeper truths.

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